

Trends in Alpine Tourism: The Mountaineers' Perspective and Consequences for Tourism Strategies

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Summary: Mountaineers are a core group in Alpine tourism, their demands and expectations are an essential foundation for every tourism development strategy. This paper is based on the authors' surveys and other studies from the Alpine region. The image of mountain sports in the media (extreme climbing, paragliding, canyoning etc.) does not reflect the actual use patterns, as hiking is still by far the most important activity. Mountaineers are a very conservative group, usually well educated and of higher income. They perform this activity frequently and are generally satisfied with the current situation, thus sceptical towards any changes and management measures. Mountaineers accept lower comfort levels, e.g. in huts, as compared to their everyday life as part of a back-to-the-roots experience. If tourism development strategies want to attract new user groups, they need to comply with the demands of this core group.

Introduction

The mountain ranges of the Alps offer a wide variety of opportunities for landscape based recreation and tourism. Traditional alpinist activities are hiking and climbing in summer and downhill as well as cross-country skiing in winter. These long established mainstream sports have been complemented in the past decades by numerous other activities such as mountain biking, canyoning, paragliding, snowshoeing, waterfall climbing, often referred to as 'trend sports'. There is extensive media coverage of these trend sports, thus also shaping the public image of alpine sports as a whole: for lifestyle and leisure magazines it is much more attractive to report on extreme sports rather than on 'old-fashioned' activities such as hiking. As most of the trend sports are highly commercialised, the media coverage is also often financed by tour operators or outfitters as part of their marketing campaigns. However, is this image consistent with reality? Doesn't the majority of mountain tourists still perform the traditional activities hiking, climbing and skiing? How do they themselves perceive trends and demands for action in mountain tourism?

This article specifically addresses issues of mountain tourism in the summer season. Since the mid 1980s there has been a significant change in many Alpine regions regarding to the seasonal distribution of tourism, with winter tourism still booming and summer tourism stagnating or in decline (see also Lüthi & Siegrist 1996). Tourism boards in various regions are concerned about the further development, as a two-seasonal utilisation of the touristic infrastructure (hotels, restaurants etc.) is essential for the economic sustainability of regions depending on tourism income.

Project context

The project "Trends and Needs of Action in Summer Mountain Tourism" was commissioned by the Tourism Section of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Economy and Labour within the framework of the "Plattform Sanfter Bergtourismus" (Platform Soft Mountain Tourism), a cooperation of major players of the Austrian tourism industry. The study was conducted by the Institute of Landscape Development, Recreation and Conservation Planning at BOKU University of Natural Resource and Ap-

plied Life Sciences Vienna in the year 2005. The main goal was to identify the current activities and behaviour patterns of the core group of mountain tourists, which is characterised by the activities of hiking and climbing, further to detect significant trends and to provide base information for the formulation of touristic strategies.

Target group

The target group of the study was the current population of mountaineers and mountain hikers in the Austrian Alps. They can be seen as the core group of mountain tourism, and any touristic strategy has to consider the needs and expectations of this group. Many different terms are used to describe activities in this context, such as “hill walking”, “mountain hiking”, “mountaineering” and “mountain climbing”. There are no universally valid definitions for these terms, nor is it possible to separate them from each other without overlaps. In the context of our study we use the term “mountain hiking” (in German: “Bergwandern”) for walking in mountainous terrain on tracks or off track, usually without the need of using the hands or any specific equipment. Opposed to that, “mountaineering” (German: “Bergsteigen”) often involves the use of the hands to proceed, as well as technical equipment such as ropes, ice axes or crampons (see Munter 1988, Lorch 1995, Brämer 2001). Therefore, mountaineering requires more specific knowledge, skills and training than mountain hiking. Both activities have in common a high dependency from the environment and actual conditions such as weather and natural hazards.

Study design

The study was conducted via on-site interviews using a structured questionnaire. In order to separate the target group from other mountain visitors, e.g. tourists accessing summits by cable cars, interviews were conducted in mountain huts, access to which involves at least two hours of walking from the closest starting point such as roads or lift stations. In total, 1189 interviews were achieved on 44 huts in different ranges of the Austrian Alps, covering both the more easily accessible lower mountain ranges of Eastern Austria and the higher and in parts also heavily glaciated ranges of Western Austria, which are usually visited by more ex-peri-

enced and well equipped mountaineers. The interviews were conducted in afternoons, which is the time when mountaineers return from the tours to the huts and when they are usually open to discussions. The rejection rate was relatively low, less than 20% for overnight visitors and less than 30% for day visitors, who needed to descend down to the valleys on the same day and therefore had less time for an interview.

Reference data

The results from the survey were compared with data from other sources, such as demographic data and other touristic survey studies, in particular the Tourism Monitor Austria 2004 (T-MONA), the most important general tourism survey in Austria with a data base of about 15000 interviews. Comparisons were also made to studies from other Alpine countries, e.g. Switzerland (SAC 2004).

Selected Results

Demography of mountaineers

Country of origin: The largest group of mountain tourists in our study are visitors from Germany (43%), followed by domestic tourists (35%) and tourists from the Netherlands (12%), thus reflecting the general visitor structure of Austrian tourism outside the major cities.

Gender

Mountaineering has for a long time been a male domain. In our survey we had 60% male and 40% female interviewees, indicating a still unbalanced gender distribution.

Age

The mean age of the sample was 41 years. When comparing the data from the survey with the general age distribution of the population in the countries of origin, it can be observed that the age group under 24 years is significantly underrepresented. Mountaineering can not really be seen as a typical activity of the younger generations, which it had been traditionally. Whilst rock climbing is a popular sport throughout the Alpine countries, attracting large crowds to competitions and show events often staged indoors, it does not seem to promote nature based mountaineering.

Education

The survey sample had a surprisingly high percentage (41%) of persons with completed tertiary education, compared to the general mean of about 15% in both Germany and Austria. This result proves findings from other studies which also reported a very high proportion of highly educated persons engaging in hiking and mountaineering (e.g. Brämer 2000).

Income

Questions about the interviewees' income were not included in the survey, however, as education is often correlated to income, it can be assumed that many mountaineers are also in income levels above the average.

Membership in Alpine Clubs

62% of the persons interviewed are members of Alpine Clubs, however, only a small group of mountaineers are actually active members engaging in the club life (group tours, social events etc.). Most mountaineers join Alpine Clubs only to receive discounts on huts and to benefit from the mountain rescue insurance which is usually included in the membership fee.

Character, frequency and organisation of tours

Days spent in the mountains: Most mountain hikers and mountaineers have a high commitment to alpinism, as they perform their activities frequently, spending in average 17 days per year in the mountains, which covers a considerable part of the individual leisure time budget.

Length of tours

About 70% of the persons in the sample have been interviewed during overnight tours, the average duration of the tours was between three and four days.

Activities

Mountain hiking without climbing is the dominant type of activity, although 40% of the interviewees also occasionally perform rock climbing or glacier tours. A specific activity of the Eastern Alpine mountain ranges is Via Ferrata climbing, i.e.

rock climbing in routes provided with wire ropes, iron handrails, ladders etc. enabling less skilled climbers to experience the atmosphere of exposed climbing terrain. There is a large range of Via Ferrata tours in Austria, Slovenia and Italy, and about 70% of the persons interviewed climb such routes at least occasionally. This means that Via Ferrata climbing is performed more often than classic rock climbing. Only a very small part (less than 10%) of the persons interviewed have experiences with activities such as canyoning, white water kayaking or paragliding. This is of course in contrast to the image communicated in media and in particular in touristic marketing campaigns.

Organisation mode

Most mountaineers prefer to organise their tours individually, alpine activities are usually performed in small groups of three to four persons. Larger groups are usually only found on huts where training courses are held by alpine clubs or by professional mountaineering schools. There is little demand for all-inclusive tour packages. Hiring professional mountain guides is much less common in Austria compared to the situation in the Western Alps of Switzerland.

Travel mode

Mountain sports in Austria rely to a great extent on access by car. Less than 15% of the persons interviewed travelled to the starting point of their tour by public transport. Therefore car traffic and the related effects can be seen as the major environmental impact of mountain sports.

Equipment

Interviewees were asked about safety and emergency equipment. Some results were surprising, in particular the relatively low use of GPS technology for navigation as opposed to traditional navigation instruments such as compass and altimeter (figure 1). More than 80% of the persons interviewed indicated that they never used a GPS device.

While most mountaineers carry some first aid kits with them, bivouac sacs, which can be essential in sudden weather changes in high alpine areas, are obviously not seen as part of the standard equipment. With the wide spread use

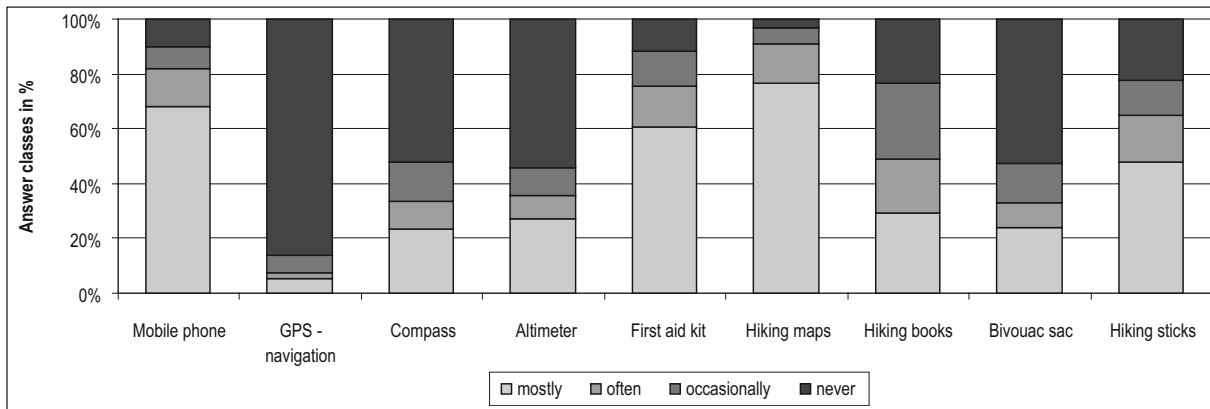


Figure 1: Safety and emergency equipment carried with by mountain hikers and mountaineers (N=1189).

of mobile phones and improved reception conditions in many mountain ranges, mountaineers seem to assume that rescue services can easily be alarmed in emergency situations.

Satisfaction levels and conflict potentials

A number of questions referred to specific demands concerning facilities and services e.g. on huts, and to conflicts with other touristic user groups such as mountain bikers or other land uses such as farming or forestry. It could be observed that the general satisfaction level is very high, and only few conflicts with other uses were reported. In particular, the conflict level concerning nature protection is very low, as conservation regulations usually do not impose restrictions on alpinist activities. This is in contrast to the situation e.g. in rock climbing areas in Germany, where there is a long history of conflicts between conservation and climbing.

Consequences for touristic strategies and needs for action

As stated before, summer tourism in the Alps is in decline, threatening the economies in many regions depending on tourism income. Touristic strategies to stabilise or moderately increase the visitation have of course to consider natural conditions, which limit the development options, but also the needs and demands of the current visitor population.

Focus on core activities

In recent years, “adventure activities” such as canyoning, paragliding or white water rafting have been in the centre of touristic marketing concepts. The Alps have been advertised as an adventure ground. Our data show that hiking is still by far the most dominant activity, and it can be assumed that this will not change in the future, in particular in the context of an aging society (see Opaschowski 2004). Therefore, marketing strategies should rather focus on the core activities than on activities which obviously are attractive only for a very small group of tourists.

Activation of potential visitor groups with similar expectations

Mountain huts, where most visitors spend their nights, are a very sensitive social environment, as they accommodate a relatively large number of visitors in a small space. Introducing new, fun- or adventure- oriented user groups to this environment would most probably cause conflicts with the current population.

Female mountaineers as welcome visitors

Touristic strategies in Alpine areas rarely target female hikers or mountaineers. The traditional image of mountaineering as a male domain might deter potential visitors, and male chauvinism can still be found on some huts. A marketing campaign to attract more female visitors would therefore also need to be complemented by awareness training e.g. for hut wardens.

Coordination of information sources on the internet

Currently there is a plethora of websites for mountaineers offering tour information, discussion forums, GPS tracks etc. Some of the platforms are purely commercial, others managed by regional tourist boards, alpine clubs or just by amateurs. Even for experienced web users it is often difficult to identify the most relevant websites for a specific region. The major players of Alpine tourism are challenged to improve this chaotic situation e.g. by forming a joint portal.

Reduction of entry barriers

Mountain hiking and in particular high alpine mountaineering require a certain level of fitness, skills and experience as well as some special equipment. The current visitor population is very much dedicated to this sport, however, the non-mountaineers seem to perceive a high entry barrier. This needs to be overcome by low-level offers such as guided one-day tours rather than talking candidates into full-week training courses.

Intensification of youth work

Youth work in Alpine Clubs is obviously successful in the context of sport climbing, which more and more develops into an indoor sport. However, traditional nature-based activities seem to be less attractive for young people. In former times, mountaineering was one of the few affordable touristic activities for young people in Alpine countries, today's more affluent youth also has much more options. It also appears, that people pursuing outdoor activities on a regular basis in their childhood, tend to continue these activities as adults (Ward Thompson et al. 2005). The fact that outdoor activities of children generally decreased in the past decades therefore is a big challenge for designing outdoor programs for young people and children.

Development of comprehensive mobility concepts for alpinism

Transport modes vary significantly throughout the Alpine countries: In Switzerland there is a dense network of railway and bus lines providing access even to remote valleys. The use of public transport is actively promoted by Alpine Clubs (Matti et al. 2004). Opposed to that, in Austria and Italy

the accessibility of alpine regions by public transport is minimal. If mountaineering in these countries wants to be recognised as a sustainable form of tourism, integrative mobility concepts need to be developed.

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